

THE BRISTOL POST OFFICE

IN THE AGE OF

ROWLAND HILL 1837–1864

DANIEL BRIGGS

POST OFFICE REGULATIONS.

ON AND AFTER THE **10th January**, a Letter not exceeding **HALF AN OUNCE IN WEIGHT**, may be sent from any part of the United Kingdom, to any other part, for **ONE PENNY**, if paid when posted, or for **TWO PENCE** if paid when delivered.

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If paid when posted, is as follows, for all Letters, whether sent by the General or by any Local Post,

Not exceeding $\frac{1}{2}$ Ounce	One Penny.
Exceeding $\frac{1}{2}$ Ounce, but not exceeding 1 Ounce	Twopence.
Ditto 1 Ounce	2 Ounces Fourpence.
Ditto 2 Ounces	3 Ounces Sixpence.

and so on; an additional Two-pence for every additional Ounce. With but few exceptions, the **WEIGHT** is limited to Sixteen Ounces.

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BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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The next pamphlet in the series will be *The Prince's Theatre, Bristol* by Don Carleton.

The Appeal Fund which the Branch launched in order to put the pamphlets on a sound financial basis is still open. Donations should be sent to Mrs E. Venning, Pamphlet Appeal Fund, Bristol Record Office, The Council House, Bristol, BS1 5TR.

A list of pamphlets in print is given on the inside back cover. Pamphlets may be obtained from the Porters' Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building, from the shop in the City Museum, from most Bristol booksellers or from Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol 9.

THE BRISTOL POST OFFICE IN THE AGE OF ROWLAND HILL 1837–1864

There have been few local studies of the campaign for postal reform in the early nineteenth century and even fewer of local developments once the reforms had been carried in parliament. Bristol, however, is fortunate in being unique amongst British cities in having a nineteenth-century monograph on its postal services, *The Bristol Royal Mail*, published in 1899 and written by Robert Charles Tombs, Bristol Postmaster from 1892 to 1895. Tombs was proud of what he had accomplished in office, and a second edition of his study appeared in 1905. Yet in 1837, when Hill published his influential pamphlet, *Post Office Reform: its Importance and Practicability*, Bristol, unlike many other provincial cities, was lukewarm about its message. It accepted the long-established system whereby postage was paid by the recipients at widely varying rates, and it was relatively passive at a time when the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, for example, gave its whole-hearted backing to Hill's plan, and supported a London-based Mercantile Committee, organised in February 1838. The ingenious and indefatigable Henry Cole, later to be a key figure in the Great Exhibition, was its secretary. The committee's periodical publication, the *Post Circular*, which was sent to Members of Parliament through the unreformed mail, included powerful articles and cartoons. It also encouraged petitioning. It is significant that of the 320 petitions presented to Parliament in the 1837/8 session there were none from Bristol and eight from Liverpool.¹

The message of postal reform was essentially a radical one, although support for it, and particularly its most important element, the Penny Post, came also from non-radical business

1. H. Robinson, *Britain's Post Office* (1953), 144. Tombs notes that two deputations to Parliament were sent from the Postmasters of Congresbury and Yatton, near Bristol, concerning heavy postal charges. *The Bristol Royal Mail* (1898), 128.

interests. The first of the four editions of Hill's pamphlet had been placatory in tone and was designed to influence the Government to adopt his plan rather than to stimulate or mobilise outside pressure. Indeed, Hill expressed the hope that no publication would be necessary. Later editions were more "popular".² There was to be a "struggle" for the Penny Post, although it was to be a far shorter struggle than that against the taxes on knowledge or the Corn Laws.

Cobden wrote that the new Penny Post was "a terrible engine for upsetting monopoly and corruption", and even before this, on hearing of the passage of the bill he is said to have commented "there go the Corn Laws".³ Hill's son wrote that the necessary alignment in the House of Commons to pass the bill arose only as a result of "a bribe by a tottering government to secure political support."⁴

Hill's plan certainly had moral as well as economic implications. G.R. Porter included a chapter on postage in *Progress of the Nation* in his section on "moral progress".⁵ Four economic arguments for reform all went together — a large diminution in the rates of postage; increased speed of delivery of letters; more frequent opportunities for despatch of letters; and simplification in the operations of the Post Office with the object of economy in management.⁶ Harriet Martineau, who believed Hill to be the most signal social benefactor of the time, was not alone in preferring to these the moral argument that existing postal rates made "the listening parent deaf and the full-hearted daughter dumb".⁷

Hill won some Tory support, however, when he pointed to two facts — first that the revenue of the Post Office had remained stationary since 1818 despite increases in population and national wealth, and secondly that much of the work of post office clerks was unnecessarily wasteful when there were so many rates and when postal charges were collected before letters started on their travels. Nevertheless, most Tories agreed with J.W. Croker, who wrote in *The Quarterly Review* that "The Gods must annihilate

2. G.B. Hill, *The Life of Sir Rowland Hill and the History of Penny Postage*, 2 vols. (1880), I. 203–5.
3. D.J. Barnes, *A History of the English Corn Laws* (1930), 242; N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League* (1958), 69.
4. E.C. Smythe, *Sir Rowland Hill: The Story of a Great Reform Told by His Daughter* (1907), 145.
5. G.R. Porter, *The Progress of the Nation* (1851 edn.).
6. W. Lewins, *Her Majesty's Mails* (1865), 175.
7. Quoted by E.C. Smythe, *op. cit.*, 130.

time and space before a uniform rate of postage can be reasonable or just".⁸ They supported the claim of one high-ranking post office official who argued that the increased number of letters which would necessarily follow the Penny Post could not be accommodated. He said "the walls of the Post Office would burst".^{8a}

The two Bristol M.P.'s before August 1837, P.J. Miles and Sir Richard Vyvyan, were Tories who were opposed to "new-fangled" reforms, and there is no evidence that their non-Tory successors, P.W. Skynner Miles and F.H.F. Berkely, were conspicuously interested in postal reform. Neither made any pronouncements on the subject, although the latter corresponded with Postmaster Generals about Bristol's particular problems.

One Bristol man who did make pronouncements against change was Sir Francis Freeling, the experienced influential Secretary to the Post Office for thirty years, but he died in 1836 before the popular struggle began.

Freeling had started his long career as an apprentice at the Bristol Post Office and had supported Bristol's Penny Post during the 1780's^{8b} — he could recall in old age the first pioneering mail coach leaving Bristol for London in 1784 with the immediate effect of accelerating the daily delivery of letters. But like John Palmer, the innovator of the mail coach, he had little interest in cheap rates. Although his memorial in the church yard of St. Mary Redcliffe claims that he "left a name which will be remembered with honour in his birthplace",⁹ one of Hill's supporters complained that he "managed the Post Office with meanness and parsimony".¹⁰

Nonetheless, Freeling always recognised that the interests of Bristol were far from local. Until the early nineteenth century, it was the second city in England after London in terms of population, wealth and "general standing", and during the 1830's and 1840's it retained a wide range of local industries, each with a regional, if not a wider, market, a sense of direct association with London, and a network of foreign relationships through its port. C.R. Dod in 1857 noted a considerable increase in population

8. J.W. Croker, 'Post Office Reform', *Quarterly Review*, xliv. 513–74.

8a. Quoted by W. Lewins, *op. cit.*, 175.

8b. The Penny Post was not a new idea in 1837. There had been local Penny Posts in London since 1680 but not with stamps or prepayment, and some large cities, including Bristol, had them from 1765 onwards. By 1820 there were 155 of these. H. Robinson, *The British Post Office, A History* (1948), 249.

9. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 84.

10. H. Robinson, *The British Post Office, A History* (1948), 249.

during the previous twenty years and the continued existence of a varied economy — “largely engaged in the shipping trade and accessory occupations, with many glass makers, blacksmiths, engine makers, and some cotton hands”.¹¹

Not surprisingly, the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1823 by “the more forward looking merchants of the City”, had been interested in postal questions from its formation, pressing, for example, for conveyance of mails to Ireland by direct steam packet¹² and for speedier arrival and departure of mails for several other places. A memorandum of 1829 had stressed Bristol’s “close association with Birmingham, Worcester and other large towns in the centre of the kingdom”.¹³ In 1836, a further memorandum to Lord Lichfield stated bluntly that “it has for some time been felt that the Post Office authorities in their various recent arrangements have not sufficiently regarded the interests of this large City”.¹⁴ The Chamber told the Duncannon Committee on the Management of the Post Office Department, set up in 1835, that necessary improvements included, “extending the limits of the general delivery, reducing the present charge of twopence per letter on the district correspondence and the bringing of the London mail through Marshfield instead of Bath, thereby reducing the postage by one penny on all London correspondence.”¹⁵

There were no similar statements from either the Bristol Corporation, reformed or unreformed, or the Society of Merchant Venturers, powerful bodies closely associated with each other. Nor did the local press have anything to say about the need for postal reform. There was little sense of the vast untapped postal potential. Instead, fears were expressed about the possible loss of public revenue. When the penny post was introduced in 1840, the *Bristol Journal* asked “How long is the revenue of this once powerful country to be entrusted to the hands of nincompoops who are now wasting it?”¹⁶ There was no clarion call from Bristol for postal reform, and little contact between Bristol and the Mercantile Committee in London. Even in 1839 when the flow of petitions became “torrential”, Bristol was left quietly on one side.

11. C.R. Dod, *Electoral Facts 1832-1853 Impartially Stated*, (1972 edn. edit. H.J. Hanham), 36.

12. Tombs, *op. cit.*, chapter ix.

13. *ibid.*, 149.

14. Bristol Chamber of Commerce’ *Report from the Directors*, January 1836.

15. Bristol Chamber of Commerce: *Report from the Directors*, January 1837. This would mean a decrease from 10d to 9d.

16. *Bristol Journal*, 16 May 1840.

There was, however, one west-country witness with Bristol connections who appeared with considerable effect before the Select Committee on Post Office affairs. George Emery, Commissioner of Taxes and Deputy Lieutenant of Somerset, was also a banker dealing directly with Bristol, and he explained that a reduced rate of postage would increase banking correspondence, then distributed in parcels by coach. He had been advocating an extension of the local penny post for twenty years, and he believed that a national reduction in postage rates would encourage children to write letters and soldiers to keep in touch with their families. He had no doubt that if the postage rate were reduced to one penny, there would be a considerable increase in correspondence amongst the middling and poorer classes.¹⁷ When the Penny Post was introduced, it was a Bristol surgeon, John Estlin, who took the initiative in proposing in 1844 a testimonial fund for Rowland Hill. In this the Mercantile Committee followed a lead from Bristol. The total raised was thirteen thousand pounds and Bristol's contribution was three hundred pounds.¹⁸

The immediate effect of the introduction of the Penny Post was a drop by half in the postal revenue. Hill, who had been appointed in 1839 on a two-year contract as postal adviser to the Treasury, was treated with suspicion at the Post Office and his contract was not renewed by the Tories in 1841. He explained that his plan would only succeed when fully applied, but he did not receive a permanent job in the Post Office until 1846.^{18a} Fears about loss of revenue were not finally quietened until 1851 when gross receipts for mail again reached pre-1840 levels. The number of letters increased from 90 millions in 1839 to 456 millions in 1855 and to 679 millions in 1864, figures far in excess of 416 million which a Postmaster General had claimed in 1839 would be necessary to justify the reforms".¹⁹

Technological changes, particularly those relating to the railways, were necessary to ensure that the walls of the Post Offices did not burst, and that mail could be collected and transmitted cheaply and with unprecedented speed. With the coming of the railway to Bristol, the mail coach which had formed so striking a feature of the town since 1784 disappeared. As the Great Western Railway made its way to Bristol, mail traffic was transferred from

17. *Report from the Select Committee on Postage* (1838), 278–83.

18. E.C. Smythe, *op. cit.*, 297; Tombs, *op. cit.*, 131.

18a. H. Robinson, *Britain's Post Office*, 1953, 158.

19. *ibid.*, 155, 171. See also Robinson, *The British Post Office, A History*, 367.

coach to rail. To begin with, the coaches were put on the railway to and from Maidenhead, that section of the line, like the section between Bristol and Bath, being completed in 1838. From 1841 the whole of the Great Western line was in use between Bristol and London. The line reached Exeter in 1844 and the line from Bristol to Gloucester was completed in the same year.²⁰

When Hill visited Bristol in 1847, he noted the increased volume of correspondence following the 1840 reform. In 1841 the average number of letters delivered weekly in Bristol was 46,289; in 1847 it was 74, 811.²¹ The comparable national figures for England and Wales were 2,970,598 and 4,572,969. Bristol was, in fact, lagging behind the national average.²² This is not surprising for its population was not rising as fast as that of England's other great cities, including its formidable rival Liverpool. Some of its industries were struggling, and the trade of its port was declining. There were signs of both inefficiency and apathy, as Alford puts it, in the conduct of affairs, and the attitude towards economic affairs of the Corporation and the Society of Merchant Venturers has been described as "intensely obscurantist".²³

There is further evidence about the post in Bristol and other places in 1855 when John Tilley, an Assistant Secretary working under Hill and a friend of Anthony Trollope, drew up a report on local Post Office management.²⁴ Tilley set about his work with such energy that he introduced genuine improvements in the whole system. It is clear from his reports that he did not regard Bristol as being anywhere near as important as Liverpool or Manchester. In Manchester, for instance, the salary of the Postmaster was double that of his Bristol counterpart. Tilley recommended that a "much larger and expensive staff of clerks" should be maintained in Liverpool than in Manchester "for correspondence and accounts", owing to the "enormous business connected with the receipt and despatch of American mails . . .".²⁵ He did not think it necessary in this context to mention Bristol.

The average number of letters delivered weekly in Bristol and

20. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 49–51.

21. J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887), 438; Post Office Archives: 'Bristol File' *Black Book of Statistics*.

22. Porter, *op. cit.*, 713.

23. B.W.E. Alford 'The Economic Development of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century: An 'Enigma', in *Essays in Bristol and Gloucestershire History* (1976), edit. Patrick McGrath and John Canon, 260, 265.

24. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Bristol*, (1855).

25. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Liverpool*, (1855).

the United Kingdom between 1855 and 1864 is set out below:²⁶

	Bristol	United Kingdom
1855	133,751	8,773,384
1854	128,785	9,199,865
1857	152,684	9,700,403
1858	160,262	10,055,209
1859	164,979	10,476,346
1860	168,804	10,846,192
1861	191,023	11,408,461
1862	139,963	11,643,673
1863	146,308	12,352,354
1864	158,490	13,059,307

While the national figures rose steadily each year — with the smallest percentage rise in 1861–2 — the Bristol figures show two falls — in 1855–6 and in 1861–2. Taking the Bristol figures as a fraction of the total, they fell from 1/65 in 1855 to 1/82 in 1864.

Figures collected nationally in 1863 concerning the number of “letters per person” bearing local postmarks show Bristol with 29 in front of Birmingham, Bradford and Manchester with 28, 26, and 21 respectively. However, these figures do not provide an index of local business activity, for there were smaller places with far higher figures — for example Malvern which stood out with 103. Leamington’s figure was 57, and those for Brighton, Windsor and Oxford 48, 40, and 36 respectively.²⁷

For the most part Bristol business men seem to have been less interested in the volume of postal traffic or in the rates charged during the period of mid-victorian growth than in the range and timing of services. There is remarkably little local comment except in relation to the continuing argument about the location of the Post Office.

Tombs claimed that the Bristol Chamber of Commerce took no active part in promoting postage reforms between 1835 and 1855,²⁸ but this is not true, for on at least twelve occasions, it commented

26. The local figures are from Post Office Archives: ‘Bristol File’ *Black Book of Statistics*. The national figures are from Post Office Archives: *Twentieth Report of the Postmaster General*, 1875, 7.

27. Post Office Archives: *Ninth Report of the Postmaster General* (1863), 114.

28. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 134.

directly on postal matters in its reports and minutes. Clearly Tombs was anxious to portray a picture of gradual postal development responding to local needs but directed efficiently from London. As against this, the vast majority of the Chamber's expressions and comments were highly critical of the postal establishment, probing searchingly into the whole question of its organization, reliability, and economics.

Amongst the issues to which the Chamber attached importance was whether Bristol should become the mail station for Ireland. Here the Chamber spoke in grand words of the "inconvenience and pecuniary loss incurred by merchants, traders and inhabitants of this great sea port"²⁹ through inadequate services. The debate was a prolonged and, at times, a heated one coming to a head on several occasions between the 1830's and the 1860's, but to no avail. Irish mail continued to be handled through Milford Haven rather than Bristol throughout the period. The routeing of American mails roused similar concern, but these continued to be received and sent via Liverpool throughout the nineteenth century.

Another issue taken up by the Chamber of Commerce was the poor postal services, particularly those in Clifton. Until 1847, Clifton had no Post Office, merely a receiving house in a pastry cook's shop. It had been handling as many as 2,000 letters each week ten years before.³⁰ In 1846 the Chamber reinforced the contents of a memorial sent by a group of Clifton residents — including peers, magistrates, solicitors and doctors — asking for the status of the office to be raised. As one resident put it, "I may safely say there is not a head of a family in this place of near 20,000 inhabitants who would not have gladly added his name".³¹ Some petitioners claimed that the lack of services was forcing residents to leave the place. In this case, the pressure was successful — a measure of the social importance of Clifton and the strength of the agitation — and Clifton acquired a branch office in August 1846. However, further attempts a year later to make Clifton a post town in its own right failed.

The Chamber continued throughout the 1850's and 1860's to

29. Bristol Chamber of Commerce: *Memorial of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce to the Postmaster General*, cited in *The Annual Report of the Chamber of Commerce*, 1836, 15.

30. Post Office Archives: *Black Book of Statistics*. See also 'The First Clifton Post Office', *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 1 February 1902.

31. Post Office Archives: *Post Book 35 1846-1852*, Petition of July 1846.

press for "cheap and uniform international colonial postage"; better postal communications with Australia; and direct communication with the West Indies (here it was backed by the West India Association of the city). In 1864 it was pressing for better arrangements for the transmission of samples and for parcel deliveries by railway with more uniform charges.³²

The Chamber remained outspoken on the subject of domestic improvement. In 1853, it described the Post Office authorities as "dilatatory" and claimed that postal arrangements were "most defective in many respects". The Chamber hoped to have the support of "the Press and their fellow citizens in their further efforts to procure a thorough investigation and satisfactory remedies".^{32a} Later, there was pressure for better links with the west "as far as Exeter and for facilities whereby the guard could pick up mail at stations".³³ Most interesting of all, perhaps, was the concern expressed by the Chamber about the wages and salaries of Post Office staff. It claimed that "as the inefficiency of the public service arises from the unjust treatment of the employees and defective internal arrangements of the local office, your committee cannot desist, notwithstanding the tedious and disagreeable nature of the task which they have undertaken, from insisting on these repeated promises being redeemed".³⁴

Such pressure played its part in backing the enquiry made by Tilley in 1855, though it is interesting to note that this report revealing converging pressures — from below on the part of postal workers and from London on the part of authorities anxious to secure greater efficiency.

Unlike the Chamber of Commerce, the Bristol Corporation felt it necessary to memorialise only twice, in 1848 and 1849. On both occasions it did so in support of claims from merchant bankers. In the first memorial it was said that the Post Office building was wholly incompatible with the accommodation required for the delivery of letters.³⁵ The Surveyor of the General Post Office visited Bristol and as a result of his enquiries, recommendations were made allowing extensions of the building with the support of

32. Bristol Chamber of Commerce: *Annual and Semi Annual Reports* for 1853, 1856, 1864.

32a. *ibid*, *Semi Annual Report for 1853*.

33. *ibid*, *Annual Report for 1860*.

34. *ibid*, *Annual Report for 1855*.

35. Post Office Archives; *Post Book 35 1846–1852*, Memorial of February 1848.

the Corporation which owned the site. A letter had already been sent by the Mayor, J.D. Pountney, to the Postmaster General along with the memorial signed "by upwards of 400 most respectable merchants, bankers, traders and other inhabitants of Bristol soliciting your Lordships attention to the very serious inconveniences which exist from the present confined access to the Post Office".³⁶

The proposals were eventually turned down on the grounds of expense.³⁷ This led to a further 1849 memorial from the Council, supported by Bristol's two members of Parliament, which stated "that in consequence of the increasing trade and population of Bristol, the inconvenience and confusion at the Post Office" through "pressure of applicants at the money order windows, and to obtain or to pay for their letters was daily increasing and becoming a public evil, such as your Memorialists humbly conceive was never meditated by her Majesty's Government, in connexion with an establishment productive of a large amount of Revenue". It argued that the expense was "inconsiderable when compared either with existing income or the extent of accommodation it would unquestionably confer on the public". The memorialists "entreated" the Treasury therefore "most respectfully but anxiously" to secure "the suitable enlargement and improvement of the Building in which the business of the Post Office is now conducted" or to make "such other provision as may obviate the evils of which citizens have so much cause to complain".³⁸ The memorial was commended by Berkely and Miles speaking as "members for the City and County of Bristol".

The evidence suggests that there was greater interest in postal matters in Bristol during the period after 1840 than there had been in the three crucial years leading up to the introduction of the Penny Post, but the real control in postal matters lay in London. Unlike the Police, the Post Office was a central institution with local responsibilities, and the districts into which it was divided did not correspond to local government units. By 1864 there were 11,316 Post Offices in the United Kingdom of which 808 were head offices and 542 head provincial establishments like Bristol. Yet there were only nine surveyors, although the Surveyors' Department was the connecting medium between the metropolitan offices

36. *ibid.*, letter of 24 June 1848.

37. *ibid.*, Memorandum of the Postmaster General, 1848.

38. *ibid.*, memorial of February 1849.

and the Post Offices in provincial towns.³⁹ The District Surveyor for the West was G.H. Cresswell.

There were only two Postmasters in Bristol between 1837 and 1863 — Thomas Todd Walton, senior, who had taken up his duties in 1832, and his son, Thomas Todd Walton, junior, who succeeded him ten years later and stayed in the position until 1871.⁴⁰ They were not the first such family dynasty for three Pines, grandfather, father and son, had been Postmasters continuously from 1694–1778.⁴¹

Tombs gives no details of the Bristol Postmasters' salaries, but Tilley's 1855 official report on the Post Office at Bristol gives the fixed salary as £450 a year along with compensation allowances amounting to £30. 10s and a profit of twenty-five per cent upon the sum received annually for the rent of private boxes.⁴² Such special emoluments had been paid to Secretaries of the Post Office in London, although they were gradually abolished. Tilley suggested a composite figure of £600 with no increments, and this appears to be the sum which was thereafter paid throughout the period.

The Waltons had considerable local prestige. The father had entered the Post Office in 1786, when he was only fourteen years old, and had a number of assignments in Holland, Sweden, Spain and Portugal before becoming Postmaster at Bristol. A local newspaper described him as "a fine old English Gentleman". The father continued to visit Bristol after his retirement, when his son, who had previously been employed as Chief Clerk, took over from him. According to Tombs, the elder Walton "initiated him into all the mysteries of the Post Office art", decreeing that "he should start at the bottom of the ladder and work his way up", so that the young Todd Walton was to be found at "mail bag opening, letter sorting and other routine work of this kind".⁴³ Nonetheless, concern was expressed about his appointment not only from within the Post Office but from the two Bristol M.P.'s who pointed out that the appointment of Postmaster rests with the Treasury except in those cases where the Postmaster General was permitted to

39. W. Lewins, *Her Majesty's Mails*, 252, 260–2.

40. Tombs, *op. cit.* 72, 73, 77.

41. *ibid.*, 70.

42. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Bristol*, (1855), 3.

43. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 73–4.

appoint from London “on the grounds of long service and economy”.⁴⁴

The conception of a ladder available for all to climb was very clearly stated in the 1855 report: “All persons must be selected according to merit for the places which they are to fill, and this principle must be strictly followed in the case of all future promotion. It must also be understood that no person can receive any increase in salary unless his conduct during the whole of the previous year shall have been satisfactory”.⁴⁵ Clearly Tilley did not believe the salaries being paid were sufficient for “the higher places” or being “regulated so as to hold out any encouragement of long and faithful service”.⁴⁶ He suggested, therefore, that the Chief Clerk, then being paid £180,⁴⁷ should receive £200 with an annual increment of £10 rising to £300. The Postmaster was paid significantly less in Bristol than in Liverpool (£1,000) and Manchester (£1,300 plus additional perquisites of £167.)

A sharp line was drawn between the “higher places” and the rest, with the clerical staff above the line and the letter carriers — later to be called postmen — and other manual workers, below it. This division corresponded to a social division in the British economy as a whole. There were wide financial differentials. There were also marked contrasts in rates and conditions of work. In 1837 there were six clerks and thirteen letter carriers.⁴⁸ By 1855 there seventeen clerks, twenty-five sorters, forty-nine letter carriers and two porters. Tilley recommended a “precise establishment”, which would include ten clerks subordinate to the Chief Clerk, divided into two classes. The first would consist of chief clerks who would act as superintendents of the Sorting Office and who would have salaries of £150 rising by annual increments of £5 to £200. The second would consist of seven clerks, with salaries rising from £100 by annual increments of £4 to £140.⁴⁹

In addition, there would be four supplementary clerks, whose salaries would start at £60 and rise to a maximum of £100 by an annual increment of £3. The advantage of having a supplementary

44. Post Office Archives: *Post Book 35, 1839–1845*, 1840.

45. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Bristol*, (1855), 3.

46. *ibid.*, 2.

47. Post Office Archives: *Black Book of Statistics*.

48. J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century*, (1887), 438.

49. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Bristol*, (1855). For comparative rates of pay for other clerks, see G. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851–1875*, 89–90.



Sir Rowland Hill

Photograph from old print, Gordon Kelsey

UNIFORM Penny Postage

THE FOLLOWING
PETITION
TO THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS,
To Pass this Important Measure without delay,
Lies here for Signatures.

READER,
Sign the Petition without a moment's delay,
BECAUSE
IT MUST BE PRESENTED BEFORE FRIDAY NEXT, JULY THE 12TH.

To the Honourable the Commons in Parliament assembled.

The humble Petition of the undersigned Inhabitants of Westminster,

Showeth,

THAT, an Englishman having invented the Uniform Penny Postage Plan, your Petitioners feel that the United Kingdom should not be behind France, and Belgium, and Prussia, and the United States, in getting it; they, therefore, humbly pray your Honourable House to give effect to the Uniform Penny Postage, payable in advance, *during the present Session of Parliament.*

And your Petitioners will ever pray.

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Postman and early Pillar Box, Windsor

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Postman's Uniform, 1855-60

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class of clerks, Tilley argued, would be that "when a vacancy occurs in either of the two higher classes, the most qualified person to fill it can be selected either from this class or from the sorters".⁵⁰ Once again, merit was the criterion of promotion.

The sorters were treated as falling "below the clerks", and they were to be paid weekly wages rather than annual salaries. There were to be four distinct grades. The lowest class of sorters would begin by being paid 16s a week rising by annual increments of 6d a week to 18s. The highest class would receive 27s a week, rising by annual increments of 1s to 33s. The intermediate classes would receive between 19s and 23s rising to 22s and 26s respectively. These wages were well above the levels suggested by Hill on his visit to Bristol in 1847⁵¹ and also above the national averages of income per head, as measured by R.D. Baxter in his study of wage statistics in the 1860's.⁵²

There was also to be a lower grade of sorter without the same degree of social security. In addition to the regular force of sorters and letter carriers, Tilley recommended employing ten auxiliary sorters at wages of 10s 6d and fourteen auxiliary letter carriers at 7s a week. These sorters and letter carriers were to be part of the great casual labour force on which the mid-Victorian economy depended. Their wages were significantly below those of the lowest paid groups in Baxter's list: for example, civil service messengers were paid 14s, the same weekly rate as general labourers and policemen, and quarrymen were paid 12s.⁵³ The rates Tilley suggested for Bristol in 1855 were lower than those which he proposed for Liverpool and Manchester.

To appreciate the force of Tilley's Bristol report, it is important to note that there was considerable pressure from below on the part of postmen and sorters in Bristol to improve their own economic position, pressure which was supported from above by the Bristol Chamber of Commerce and by F.H.F. Berkely, one of the two Bristol MP.'s. It is interesting to note that Tilley began his report on Bristol, unlike his other reports, with a reference to "several memorials from the clerks and others in the Post Office at Bristol, praying for increases in salary".⁵⁴

50. *ibid.*, 6.

51. Post Office Archives: *Post Book 35 1846-1852*, Report to the Postmaster General on the Bristol postal arrangements, April 1847 (unpublished).

52. R.D. Baxter, *National Income* (1868). See also G. Best, *op. cit.*, 95-9.

53. Best, *op. cit.*, 97.

54. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Bristol*, (1855), 1.

As early as 1846, the stampers in Bristol had been pressing for higher wages and the letter carriers followed suit a year later.⁵⁵ At first, this could have had little effect, for when Rowland Hill visited Bristol he actually suggested reducing the wages of letter carriers by making them even more casual. He wrote “we wish to increase the number of letter carriers whose pay we propose to reduce to 6s a week”.⁵⁶ He then went on to say that the new clerks “must be appointed with the distinct understanding that their salaries are to be the subject of this revision”.⁵⁷ It is scarcely surprising that one of Trollope’s criticisms of Hill was that “he was a hard taskmaster”.⁵⁸

There was a further enquiry in 1863 relating to Bristol when a Mr. Good reported on wages and conditions of work in response to further demands by the letter carriers supported by the Chamber of Commerce for increased wages.^{58a} Good’s suggestions took account of new developments since 1855. The emergence of branch offices at Redcliffe, North Street and Clifton meant that there was a great expansion in the volume of work.

Good’s report was less comprehensive than Hill’s report of 1847. Yet he was more sympathetic to the postal workers and stated bluntly that the Postmaster’s pay was “needlessly high” and should be reduced when there was a vacancy. He suggested, first, a small addition to the number of persons employed, second a complete separation of duties between letter carriers and stampers; and third, the ending of a supplementary force. All the letter carriers should be put on the same scale.⁵⁹

It was a sign, perhaps, of the increasing concern for the welfare of the staff that as early as 1857 there had been an enquiry by the Post Office Department’s Medical Adviser in London⁶⁰ into the effects on the sorters of working in what was called a confined setting “much too confined for the work required to be transacted there”. The letter carrier’s space was described as even more crowded, each individual being allowed only 218 cubic feet of air, “much below what is necessary for health”.⁶¹

55. Post Office Archives: *Post Book 35 1846–1852*, letter to the Postmaster General, 1848.

56. *ibid.*, *Report to the Postmaster General on the Bristol postal arrangements*, (April 1847).

57. *ibid.*

58. A. Trollope, *Autobiography*, 1953 edition, 133.

58a. Post Office Archives: *Post Book 35 1860–1865*, Report to the Postmaster General on the Bristol postal arrangements, 1865 (unpublished).

59. *ibid.*

60. *ibid.* *Post Book 35 1853–1859*, Postmaster General’s Minutes, 1857.

61. *ibid.*, *Post Book 35, 1853–1859*, Report of Dr. Lewis, 1 October 1857.

Five years later, F. Poole Lansdowne was appointed as Medical Officer and was still holding the post when Tombs wrote. Medical attendance was free, and a Post Office Benefit Society founded in 1861 offered further medical benefits.

In this respect, the sorters and letter carriers were a relatively favoured group. At the same time, as a trade unionist was to argue later in the century, while "labour in the Post Office" had "gained something of a recognition of its value; it had been forced to fight its way oft times with manacled hands and tape-tied feet".⁶² There were no pensions in this period and some of the fighters were very old — "life-long toilers", as Tombs called them.⁶³

The letter carriers were all provided with uniform and boots. In the 1850's and 1860's they had a scarlet uniform.⁶⁴ In Bristol, as in other towns and cities visited by Tilley, wage rates were fixed on the assumption that letter carriers would be provided with boots and uniform clothing — "hat and coat once yearly and a water-proof cape once in two years".⁶⁵ In his Liverpool Report, Tilley stated that wages would be too low if uniforms were not supplied. The Liverpool Report produced further reasoning on the topic of uniforms, "the Postmaster and Inspector of letters are decidedly of the opinion that the letter carriers should be in uniform as it would tend very materially to prevent loitering in the streets and act generally as a great check upon the men. It would also be a popular measure".⁶⁶

The Postmen were to take their place alongside the other uniformed workers of the time including policemen, railwaymen and many domestic workers. They were to be subject to a considerable and increasing degree of discipline under the new arrangements. Before 1855 the Bristol Postmaster had been required to seek authority from London before he could reprimand any member of his staff, however junior. This frequently involved a needlessly drawn-out procedure whereby the Postmaster would have to write to the Postmaster General — whether to report a clerk charging the incorrect postage or to reprimand a letter carrier for drunkenness on duty. After 1855 the Postmaster was held to be responsible not only for discipline but for the "well working of the postal services within his own office throughout the

62. H.G. Swift, *A History of Postal Agitation*, 13.

63. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 245.

64. *ibid.*, 235.

65. *ibid.*

66. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Liverpool* (1855), 5

city and the immediate neighbourhood".⁶⁷

The city network took some time to take shape as Bristol grew in population and area beyond the limits of the old Penny Post district. It was an extensive area, however — the distance from point to point being thirty miles with width ranging from five to twelve miles. Much of it was agricultural in character and many "rural sub-postmasters" acted as letter carriers.⁶⁸ There are interesting statistics for 1847 — unfortunately not for other dates — of the cost of maintaining subordinate offices. Clifton cost £120 annually. No other receiving Office cost more than £17. Some, like Abbotsleigh and Old Passage, cost as little as £2.2s. In addition to the Clifton branch office set up in 1846 there were two further branch offices — with four collections a day — and receiving houses at Bedminster, Hotwells and Redland — with three collections a day — and later (after 1859) in Ashley Road.⁷⁰

The central office had a long and at times controversial history.⁷¹ There are records of a Post-House as early as 1670, although the site of it is unknown.⁷² In 1750, a new Post Office was built to the west of the Exchange in Corn Street; the building and the land belonged to the Corporation. It was subsequently enlarged, although only the ground floor was set aside for postal business.

Suggestions that there should be a complete change of site were rejected after "a timely remonstrance of the Chamber of Commerce in 1827",⁷³ but the problem persisted even after the Corporation in 1839 had granted a new lease of the premises and of additional ground behind the building to allow for enlargement.⁷⁴ The introduction of uniform Penny Post added to the seriousness of the space problems, and in his 1847 Report Hill turned his attention to the subject of buildings: "The building is barely large enough even for the present force, and I am of the opinion that to make the whole arrangements efficient and satisfactory, it will be

67. Post Office Archives: *Report upon the Post Office at Liverpool* (1855), 5.

68. Taking the country as a whole, there were more Postmasters (9,973) than letter carriers (9,152). See *Eleventh Report of the Postmaster General* (1865), 20.

70. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 136–7. Tombs gives no dates, and *The Bristol Guide* for 1859 describes only the first three receiving offices. Tombs gives the addresses of the two branch offices as Haberfield Crescent and Phippen Street. The 1859 *Bristol Guide* names North Street and Redcliffe.

71. Stone, *loc. cit.*, 275–6, gives details of early changes in the classification and site of the General Office.

72. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 89.

73. *ibid.*, 93.

74. J. Latimer, *op. cit.*, 440.

necessary to considerably enlarge it, an improvement which with the concurrence of the Corporation to whom the building belongs, might be effected at moderate cost. To this measure I would recommend the attention of Mr. Cresswell to be directed".⁷⁵ In his Diary he was even more emphatic about the problems of the old Post Office and the need for modification . . . "The office itself I found small, badly lighted and worse ventilated".⁷⁶

Hill suggested that because of the smallness of the Office a "sorting office at or near the station should be established" (with six extra clerks to carry out the necessary work). With such a development, mail passing through Bristol would not have to be brought from Temple Meads to the city centre and back again before being forwarded.⁷⁷

Nonetheless, there was a general unwillingness to change the main Post Office location which was felt to be convenient, and in 1863 Good lent official support to the idea of staying there, even though in the same year the Post Office Authorities offered £15,000 towards building a new Post Office if Bristol residents would contribute £2,000 themselves. There was so little interest in this suggestion that only a small number of people attended a local meeting, some of those not attending giving the excuse that "it would be wise to defer any decision on the subject until the attention of the Government as to granting a criminal assize was known; for should the answer from headquarters be in the affirmative, it would be necessary to build a new court somewhere, in which case the Guildhall would perhaps suit as a Post Office". A new site was not to be acquired until 1865.⁷⁸

In the year of Hill's report the local number of staff employed at Bristol main Post Office was fifty-two. Between 1847 and 1855 the number nearly doubled. The three developments of particular importance were the opening of the new railway sorting office, the creation of a separate Money Order Department, and the launching of the new Clifton Branch Office. Each change came in response to greater business and increased demands for an improved range of postal services.

The organisation of Bristol postal services was radically altered with the development of post boxes after 1856. Within two years

75. Post Office Archives: *Report to the Postmaster General on the Bristol Postal arrangements*, April 1847.

76. G.B. Hill, *op. cit.*, 57.

77. Post Office Archives: *Report to the Postmaster General on the Bristol Postal arrangements*, (April 1847).

78. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 96. The extended office was opened in Small Street in 1868.

there were seventeen of them, either pillar boxes or boxes in walls.⁷⁹ Before this date, receiving offices, scattered centres where locked boxes were kept, had been used for the collection of mails, and Cresswell's 1856 Minute survives begging "to recommend that the proposal to close the receiving office at Kingsdown Bristol, and to establish three letter boxes in the neighbourhood at the points specified . . ." Cresswell noted the economies of the change. A salary of £12 a year previously paid to the owner of the Kingsdown service would be stopped, but it would be necessary to set aside an allowance of £10 a year for clearing the three pillar boxes.⁸⁰

As far as delivery of letters was concerned, an inconsistent and unreliable service was in operation before 1840 when there were, according to Latimer, thirteen letter carriers⁸¹ at any time during the day. When Hill visited Bristol in 1847 a more regular pattern of delivery had come into being. He found that the first delivery of the day, which began at 8.30, was not completed on average before 11.30, even though the London mail had arrived at 1.30 a.m. and the mail from the North of England at 6.10 a.m. Hill recommended that the letter carriers should start work at 7.00 a.m. and that the preparatory sorting work, should be carried out, as Cresswell had already recommended, at or near the station.⁸² He also demanded a larger force of letter carriers — eight more — as Tilley was to reiterate in 1855 and Good in 1863.

It was not only an increase in the number of letter carriers which was thought to be important. Emphasis was also placed on their reliability and discipline. As late as 1847, they were said to be carrying out their duties very much as they wished, and in consequence the principal merchants in the City and the "Country Gentleman" outside were forced to keep private bags at considerable annual expense.⁸³ Such arrangements survived uniform Penny Postage as did the practice of collecting letters direct from the Post Office. Deliveries for all addresses were not established until 1865.⁸⁴

Throughout the whole period there was no parcel post. This was

79. Post Office Archives: 'Bristol File', *Black Book of Statistics*.

80. Post Office Archives: *Post Book 1853–1859*, Postmaster General's Minutes, 1856.

81. J. Latimer, *op. cit.*

82. Post Office Archives: *Report to the Postmaster General on the Bristol Post Arrangements*, April 1847.

83. Lewins, *op. cit.*, 291. A Post Office Minute (Post Office Archives: *Post Book 35 1846–1852*, 1848) stated that Private Boxes were no longer to be granted for less than six months.

84. Post Office Archives: *Eleventh Report of the Postmaster General*, 1866, 21.

not introduced until 1883, although there was an increasing demand for one in the 1860's, and Henry Cole, in face of opposition from the railways, had proposed one as early as 1839.⁸⁵

It was possible, however, to send newspapers and books by post, and Bristol benefited from both these services, which were always singled out by writers anxious to establish the claim of the Post Office to be assisting in "social" and "moral" progress. The service as introduced in 1848 with the charge of 6d a pound, and in 1854 the number of packets going through the post was 750,000. By 1861, the figure was 12 million. The rate had been reduced in 1855 to a penny for four ounces.⁸⁶ The Bristol statistics of weekly deliveries show a marked overall increase, although far less dramatic than those for the country as a whole between 1855 and 1860 — with considerable variation in the newspaper figures.⁸⁷

The development of the money order business followed the national pattern, although Hill took a personal interest in the detailed Bristol arrangements in 1847 when he was closely involved in the improvement of the national system. The money order Department, which was losing money in 1848, was showing a profit by 1852.⁸⁸ The business which it carried out was stated in 1855 to have no necessary connection with that of the Post Office and might have been "carried on by other departments of government or by private persons".⁸⁹ Yet by 1884 the Post Office had moved into banking too. Clifton had the first savings bank in Bristol in September 1881 and central facilities were supplied the following spring. The money order business had itself been further re-modelled in 1859.⁹⁰

The origins of the money order Department of the Post Office went back to 1792, but it was not until 1838 that Lord Lichfield obtained the consent of the Treasury to convert the office into a branch under his immediate direction.⁹¹ By the time Rowland Hill entered the service, the number of money orders had reached a figure of 3,000,000, which had risen by the end of 1854 to 5,500,000. Just as significant was the amount of money remitted. This had reached £10,000,000 by 1854 and ten years later, when

85. Robinson, *The British Post Office, A History*, 328, 410.

86. Robinson, *Britain's Post Office*, 194.

87. Post Office Archives: 'Bristol File', *Black Book of Statistics*.

88. Smythe, *op. cit.*, 218.

89. Post Office Archives: *First Report of the Postmaster General* (1855), 6.

90. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 189.

91. Lewins, *op. cit.*, 157. Until 1838 the service had been licensed to private operators.

Hill resigned, it had passed the £16,000,000 mark.⁹²

Hill tidied up the accounting system, evidence of the part played by the Post Office in what has been called a “revolution” in official account-keeping. Under the “old-system” the accounts of provincial postmasters had usually been from three to six months in arrears, and no vouchers had been demanded for the proper disbursement of the money with which they were credited. In consequence, the postmasters were themselves often ignorant of the actual state of affairs, or, it was said, were sometimes tempted to divert public funds to their own pockets. Under the new system, each Postmaster rendered his account weekly showing proper vouchers, receipts and payments, and the money left in hand was to be the smallest possible sum.⁹³

The effect of the national changes in the money order system on Bristol were significant. Latimer commented that in 1837 “owing to the charge imposed on money orders (8d in the pound on small sums and a higher rate on remittance above £2) the entire amount of transaction in Bristol averaged only about £500 a year”.⁹⁴ (For 1834 the figure had been £532).⁹⁵ In 1847 no less than 3,422 were paid. By 1855, 20,000 transactions took place, a figure which had risen by 1862 to 182,000.⁹⁶ With the need for “even more elbow room”, a separate office for money orders was opened in September 1855 in a shop in Small Street.⁹⁷

Charles Dickens left a memorable description of a money order office: “A prosaic place enough at first sight”, he wrote, “but when we went there to look about us, the walls seemed presently to turn to burnished gold, the clock to go upon a thousand jewels, the clerks to be Ministers of Fortune, dispensing wisdom, riches, beauty to the human race”.⁹⁸ If the Bristol Post Office did not quite live up to this description, it was nonetheless a place which was in Tomb’s phrase “sufficiently commodious and convenient”⁹⁹ to meet Bristol’s growing needs.

The electric telegraph made its first appearance in Bristol in 1852 as a private operation. It was some eighteen years before it was annexed to the Post Office. The line was constructed by the

92. Smythe, *op. cit.*, 218.

93. *ibid.*, 219.

94. J. Latimer, *op. cit.*, 339.

95. Post Office Archives: ‘Bristol File’, *Black Book of Statistics*.

96. *ibid.*

97. Stone, *loc. cit.*, 275.

98. Charles Dickens, *Household Words*, 20 March 1852, 13.

99. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 95.

Great Western Railway Board.¹⁰⁰ For a time, the entire business of receiving and transmitting messages was conducted in a small apartment of the Commercial Rooms by the Electric and International Company, but with the arrival of two additional telegraph companies later in the 1850's — the British and Irish Magnetic Company and the United Kingdom Telegraph Company — new offices were set up in Exchange Avenue and Corn Street.¹⁰¹

Tombs present a short survey of the chief developments in telegraph line construction which are only of indirect consequence here. However, interestingly he does record that in 1859 the firm of Messrs. W.D. and H.O. Wills, described as "tobacconists and snuff manufacturers", laid down an electric telegraph wire between their warehouse in Maryport Street and their manufactory in Redcliffe Street "Whereby the partners and employees although engaged in different parts of the city were enabled to converse with each other as readily as if occupying the same counting house". The wire was used wholly for their own business.¹⁰²

There was certainly a sense of bustle about the Post Office of the 1850's and 1860's on the eve of the striking changes of the 1870's. Thus Charles Dickens wrote a eulogistic article in *Household Words* in 1852, and ten years later Mathew Hill was stressing how "intercommunication of every kind tells upon the increase of letters".¹⁰³ "It is scarcely possible", Lewins concluded, "to overestimate the importance of the postal regulations of this country".¹⁰⁴

This study shows the extent to which Bristol's postal development took place within the national framework. By the time that Hill died, the postal services had been effectively nationalised and room for local initiative had been circumscribed by national regulations. In most respects Bristol followed the pattern of "a typical provincial Post Office" as Hill had described it in 1847.^{104a}

At the same time there was room for characteristically Victorian local pride. Tombs, son of an officer in the East India Company's services, had served the Post Office well himself in London before

100. Stone, *loc. cit.*, 276; Tombs, *op. cit.*, 199.

101. *ibid.*

102. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 199–200.

103. Charles Dickens, *loc. cit.*; M.D. Hill, 'The Post Office', *Fraser's Magazine*, lxvi (1862).

104. Lewis, *op. cit.*, 301.

104a. Post Office Archives: *Report to the Postmaster General on the Bristol postal arrangements* (April, 1847). See Smythe; *op. cit.*, 217 for the account in Hill's diary.

he moved to Bristol as Surveyor-Postmaster in 1892. His last position had been that of Controller of the London postal service which he had to leave in 1847 on grounds of ill-health, when he was only 45 years old. He knew well both the London and the national scene. Once in Bristol, however, he was proud of his new assignment which lasted until 1905. He not only wrote his two books¹⁰⁵ on the Bristol Postal Service — unique in this country — but he played an active part in bodies like the Clifton Antiquarian Society, his membership of which he listed in *Who's Who*. He ended his book *The Bristol Royal Mail* with these words:

“The Post Office is ever progressing, and in course of time there will be further particulars for a future writer to relate concerning ‘The Bristol Royal Mail’ ”.¹⁰⁶

105 Tombs' second book *The King's Post* was published in Bristol in 1905.

106. Tombs, *op. cit.*, 295.

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